**It’s Up to You**

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**Abstract**

Part of our ordinary conception of our freedom is the idea that commonly when we act—and often even when we don’t act—it is up to us whether we do this or that. This paper examines efforts to spell out what must be the case for this idea to be correct. Several claims regarding the basic metaphysics of agential powers are considered; they are found not to shed light on the issue. Thinking about agents’ psychological capacities provides some illumination, though the idea of freedom remains puzzling.

Let ‘*A*’ be a placeholder for verbs of action (or activity), such as ‘speak’, ‘eat’, or ‘walk’, and verb phrases built on these, such as ‘speak on Tuesday’, ‘eat in the breakfast room’, or ‘walk briskly’. (I’ll use ‘*B*’ in the same way.) Consider:

1. commonly when one *A*-s, it is up to oneself whether one *A*-s; and
2. often when one does not *A*, it is up to oneself whether one *A*-s.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These claims, I suggest, are apparent data points for a theory of human agency. Each has the appearance of truth, and not because it appears to follow from other things that appear true, but simply in light of our experience of, and our conception of, our own agency and that of other human agents. Indeed, the two claims can fairly be said to be part of our ordinary conception of the freedom we have with respect to our agency. Even if, as might be argued, we could be morally responsible for our conduct without these claims being true,[[2]](#footnote-2) rejecting them would require significant revision of our self-understanding.

I find claims (1) and (2) both intuitive and puzzling. It seems to me that they are true, and yet when I think about the matter, I’m not quite sure I that understand what their truth would come to, what would have to be in place in the world for them to be true.

Several philosophers have offered views of this matter in terms of distinctive powers of agency, or will, or free will. Though reading their work has helped clarify the problem, it hasn’t dispelled my puzzlement. After discussing this work, I consider some similarities, as well as differences, between action and the formation of belief. The similarities suggest that attention to a variety of psychological capacities can shed some light on what it is for something to be up to oneself, even if it fails to provide a full solution to the problem.

1. WHAT KIND OF THING IS UP TO US?

In philosophical work on agency, various things are said to be up to us on certain occasions. Sometimes it is “our decisions” (Ginet 2014, 25), “what actions we perform” (Pink 2019, 142), “what one does” (Mele 2017, 109), “what one will decide” (126), “which actions we perform” (Pink 2016, 129), or “how we act” (Pink 2009, 101); at others, it is “*whether* one will do A or do B” (van Inwagen 2011, 475), “whether we do A or refrain” (Pink 2016, 114), “whether we act when the opportunity is present” (Alvarez 2013, 110), or whether, on such occasions, we “exercise the abilities” that we possess (109).

Helen Steward observes that what can be up to me are “the answers to a whole range of questions that are settled by my action when I act” (2012, 37). These include questions concerning *whether*, *when*, *where*, or *how* I shall *A*, and Steward sometimes says that it is these *questions* that are up to the agent. Since, as the variable is being used here, what takes the place of ‘*A*’ can be an expression such as ‘speak on Tuesday’, ‘eat in the breakfast room’, or ‘walk briskly’, when any of these “when,” “where,” or “how” questions is up to an agent—and likewise, I’d think, when a “which” question is up to someone—at least one “whether” question is up to her.[[3]](#footnote-3) (As I discuss in section 6, broadening our focus to include belief as well as action, it is not clear that the same can be said about “what” questions.) Since the “whether” formulation covers at least most cases, I’ll largely stick to it, sometimes saying that what is up to an agent is whether something is the case.

When some “whether” question is up to an agent, it is up to her whether *or not* something is the case. The disjunctive formulation suggests that on such an occasion, the agent has at least two options, or alternatives, open to her, on one of which (for some proposition that *p*), it will be the case that *p*, and on the other of which it will not be the case that *p*. And, indeed, the notion of options is commonly discussed together with that of its being up to an agent whether something is the case.

2. TWO-WAY POWER

A claim that is often made in this context is that agency, or will, or freedom, is a “two-way power.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Plausibly, whenever one acts—whenever one performs an action or engages in some activity—one exercises, in acting, a power to act. The idea that agency (or free agency) is a two-way power might then be that whenever one acts (or whenever one acts freely), one exercises, in acting, a two-way power to act.

What is it for a power to act—or, for that matter, for any power—to be a two-way power? The descriptor suggests that the power can be manifested in either of (at least) two ways, and this is indeed what some who use the expression have in mind. E. J. Lowe, for example, maintains that will is a two-way power, and he explains: “As a free human agent…I do have a power *not* to will to raise my arm because I have a power to will *not* to raise it. And this is *the very same power* that I can alternatively exercise by instead willing to raise it” (2013, 164). The power is two-way in that one possessing it can exercise it either in willing to do or in willing not to do a certain thing.

But others appear to have something different in mind. Maria Alvarez says that what characterizes a two-way power is “the fact that when the conditions for the exercise of the power obtain, the power need not be manifested” (2013, 102). She continues: “whether the power is manifested depends on the thing whose power it is” (102). Alvarez illustrates: “for my ability to cook omelettes to be a *two*-way power it must be up to me whether I exercise the ability when I have the opportunity to do so—that is, it must be up to me whether or not I cook omelettes then” (109).

I have a power to cook omelettes, and commonly I can exercise this power in any of several ways (making an omelette with two eggs, or with three, for example). But, of course, *not cooking omelettes* is not a way of cooking omelettes. And Alvarez’s view, I take it, is that my not cooking omelettes, on some occasion when it is up to me whether I do so, is not a way of exercising my power to do so. That the power can be exercised in either of two (or more) ways is, on this conception, not what matters to its being a two-way power.

Steward (2012, 155) observes that, on some occasion, it might be up to an agent whether she decides to *A* even if the option of deciding not to *A* is not open to her. The agent’s only option, Steward says, might be that of *not making a decision* at that time; and the agent’s not making a decision might be “an omission, not an act” (170).[[5]](#footnote-5) Steward nevertheless holds that the agent in such a case has a “power of *refrainment*” (156), and apparently she takes the agent’s omission to be an exercise of this power. “The power to act,” she says, “is a two-way power: to act or to refrain from acting” (155). When the agent refrains from deciding to *A*, then, her so refraining, even if not an act, is an exercise of her power to refrain, and *that* power is (the same as) her power to decide to *A*. Though differing from Lowe about what the ways must be, Steward seems to agree that a two-way power is one that can be manifested by its possessor in either of (at least) two ways.[[6]](#footnote-6)

An exercise of a power to act would, I think, be an action or activity. Hence, on this point, Alvarez’s view of the matter seems preferable. Omitting to *A*, even when it is up to oneself whether one *A*-s, need not be exercising one’s power to *A*.

Acting otherwise than *A*-ing, when it is up to oneself whether one *A*-s, is commonly not exercising a power to *A*. On some occasion when it is up to me whether I drive to the store, I might instead walk to the store. In walking to the store, I exercise a power to act; but it is not a power to drive that I exercise. If in this case my not driving to the store is not my exercising a power to drive, it need not be when, rather than driving to the store, I simply don’t go.

On a different point, Steward objects against Alvarez that on some occasion an agent might exercise in *A*-ing a two-way power even though it is not up to the agent *whether* she *A*-s then. It can suffice, she says, if it is up to the agent *how* she *A*-s (2012, 182). However, as noted above, if it is up to an agent how she *A*-s, then, for some description of an act as *B*-ing, it is up to the agent whether she *B*-s.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We might then say that when an agent exercises a two-way power to act, there is some correct description ‘*A*’ of what she does such that it is up to her whether she *A*-s. With two-way power explicated in this way, however, the idea sheds no light on what it is for something to be up to an agent, since we have used this latter notion in explicating two-way power.

3. DETERMINING THROUGH CHOICE

Alvarez maintains that “to say that [whether we act] is up to us is to say that we determine, through our choice, whether we act or not” (2013, 110). The claim might bring to mind the flawed view that it is up to oneself whether one *A*-s just in case one determines, by an act of choice distinct from one’s *A*-ing (or not *A*-ing), whether one *A*-s. Such a view is inapplicable to choice itself. When it is up to oneself whether one chooses to *A*, its being so is not a matter of one’s determining, by an act of choice distinct from one’s choosing (or not choosing) to *A*, whether one so chooses.

Alvarez makes it clear that this reading is *not* what she intends. An agent’s choosing to stay in a room, she says, “needn’t be anything other than his staying while being aware that that is what he is doing” (2013, 119).

But with choice understood in this way, it might be that one can determine, through one’s choice, whether one *A*-s even though it isn’t up to oneself whether one *A*-s. Consider a weightlifter who succeeds at deadlifting 200 kg on only about a quarter of her attempts. On an occasion when she succeeds, we may suppose that if she had not lifted the weight while aware that she was doing so, she wouldn’t have lifted it. Whether she lifts the weight then counterfactually depends on whether she lifts it with that awareness; and the latter, Alvarez’s view implies, might be just what the weightlifter’s choosing to lift the weight comes to. Further, the weightlifter’s choice, so understood, suffices for her lifting the weight. It then appears that she determines, through her choice, whether she lifts the weight. Yet, given the rate of failure, it is at best questionable whether it is up to her whether she lifts it.

Alvarez’s claim, as well, requires *more* than what is necessary for its being up to an agent whether she *A*-s. Consider a case in which someone does not think to do something that she ought to do, and easily could do—for example, say “thanks” when done a favor. It might be up to the agent whether she thanks her benefactor. But since she does not think to do so, it would seem that she does not determine, through her choice, whether she says “thanks.” (She does not omit with an awareness that she is omitting.) If this is correct, then the range of omissions to which claim (2) applies is broader than Alvarez’s claim allows.

It might be objected that if the agent does not think to say “thanks”—if she does not consider this option—then she is unable to say “thanks,” and thus it is not up to her whether she does so. Alvarez does, with respect to some cases, deny ability on account of lack of awareness. Suppose, for example, that “I unwittingly start a war by deliberately pressing a button” (2013, 110). She maintains that “since I wasn’t aware of the connection between pressing the button and starting the war, I did not have the ability and hence didn’t have the two-way power to start the war (at any rate, not by pressing the button)” (110). But imagine that I had been told, I understood, and I was fully capable of recalling on the occasion in question that pressing the button would start a war. It might then have been up to me whether I started one.

Thinking of the option of doing a certain thing might be *a condition of the exercise* of ability of a certain kind (say, ability to do a certain thing intentionally). But it is not *a condition of possession* of ability. Alvarez draws the distinction, I think correctly, when it comes to motivation. “The idea that someone *would not* refrain in the absence of motives to do so,” she observes, “is not to be equated with the claim that she *could not* refrain in the absence of such motives” (2013, 117). A parallel claim can be made about thought: the idea that an agent *would* not express gratitude in the absence of thinking of doing so is not to be equated with the claim that, in the absence of thinking of doing so, she is *unable* to do so.

4. A POWER TO DETERMINE ALTERNATIVES

The weightlifter might freely lift the weight on some occasion, and exercise free will in lifting it then, despite her rate of failure. Then, if given the rate of failure it is not up to her whether she lifts the weight, it need not be up to oneself whether one *A*-s in order for one to freely *A*, or to exercise free will with respect to one’s *A*-ing.

Indeed, one can freely *A* even when it is, in some respect, up to *someone else* whether one *A*-s. At numerous points during a major league baseball game, it is up to the manager whether the pitcher is allowed to continue (though it might also be up to the pitcher whether, when allowed, he continues to pitch). We might say that the pitcher and the manager have different roles in determining whether the pitcher completes the game. But the determining role of the manager does not bear on whether the pitcher freely pitches nine innings, if he does.

In either of these cases, it can be up to the agent whether, given the opportunity, she attempts to do a certain thing; and whether the agents make certain decisions might well be up to them. Thus, I don’t think that we find reason here to reject the idea that a central feature of our conception of our freedom is that it is commonly up to us whether we do certain things.

Having an opportunity to *A* is often mentioned (for example, by Alvarez [2013, 109]) as a necessary condition for its being up to oneself whether one *A*-s. When it is, it can be up to oneself whether one *A*-s even if it is not up to oneself whether this necessary condition of one’s *A*-ing is satisfied. On some occasion when it is raining, it can be up to me whether I walk in the rain, even though it is not up to me whether it is raining.

Opportunity, in an ordinary sense, isn’t the only condition of this sort; an agent’s intrinsic condition can be as well. Individuals with Addison’s disease sometimes, in stressful situations, faint without warning. Imagine such an agent at her dissertation defense, choosing at a certain moment to give a certain reply to a question that has been asked. An attack at that particular moment would be unlikely, but the probability, we may suppose, is nonzero, and it is not up to the agent whether it occurs. Still, it seems to me, it might be up to the agent whether she replies in that way then.

Further, one does not decide to *A* unless the option of *A*-ing occurs to one (or is otherwise brought to one’s attention). But often it is not up to oneself whether this or that option occurs to one (or is brought to one’s attention). Nevertheless, it can still be up to oneself whether one decides on some occasion to *A*.

I suggested in the preceding section that it can be up to oneself whether one expresses gratitude on some occasion even if the option of doing so does not occur to one (and, we can add, is not brought to one’s attention). If this is correct, then, since it would seem to be a necessary condition of intentionally expressing gratitude that one think to do so, it appears that it can be up to oneself whether one intentionally does a certain thing even if there is some necessary condition of one’s intentionally doing that thing that is not satisfied and it is not up to oneself whether that condition is satisfied. Motivation might provide another example of this possibility.

It is notable that in both of these cases, the condition can be brought about by an exercise of one’s own capacities (of thought or desire). That one is capable of thinking (or wanting) to do a certain thing might be a requirement, in these cases, for its being up to oneself whether one performs the action in question. Still, that one can think to do a certain thing falls short of its being up to oneself whether that option comes to mind.

Thomas Pink maintains that the freedom that we have when it is up to us whether we do a certain thing is “a power to determine alternatives” (2016, 125). I have no objection to this way of putting things. But we should be clear that such a power is not absolute dominion over whether something occurs. If we have this power at all, we can have it with respect to some course of conduct even if our carrying out that conduct requires conditions with respect to which we lack this power. We are, after all, only human.

5. AN EXTRAORDINARY POWER

Pink observes that many causal powers, such as that of a hurled brick to shatter a window, are powers to do but one thing. Others—he imagines the power of one particle to accelerate another—might be chancy, sometimes manifesting one way, sometimes another. The latter would be “multi-way,” but they would not feature “freedom of specification”—it would never be up to the things possessing them *which way* these powers were manifested (2016, 119-21). Nor would such chancy powers feature “freedom in relation to the power” (160)—it would never be up to the things possessing them *whether* they were exercised. In contrast, as conceived by us, Pink says, our freedom has both of these features. Thus understood, he maintains, freedom is not an “ordinary causal power.” It is, rather, a “non-causal form of power” (2019, 168), something “*sui generis*…qualitatively different from powers and capacities found in wider nature” (2016, 123).

Alvarez (2013, 110) and Steward (2012, 200) both take agency to be a causal power: acting, they hold, is causing something. It is, further, an *agent’s* causing something—causation by the being possessing the power, not by any event involving that agent or any state of her.[[8]](#footnote-8) But this last feature does not, on their views, distinguish human agency from what can be found throughout nature; there is, they hold, causation by objects animate and inanimate, macro and micro. Thus, powers to act are not in this respect unique. They are, nevertheless, distinctive among causal powers: when they are exercised (and, on Alvarez’s view, sometimes when they are not), it is up to the things possessing them whether something is the case.

Human agency is undoubtedly extraordinary. We’ve found nothing else in the entire world quite like it. Evidently, powers to act possessed by human agents are, in some respect, remarkably different from any others known to us. But does the difference lie in freedom’s being a non-causal power?

Just as possessors of certain causal powers lack “freedom in relation to the power,” so do some possessors of putative non-causal powers that Pink affirms. An evident mathematical truth, he suggests, might possess a power to move you to assent to it; an evidently desirable option might exert its power in moving you to desire it. The things possessing these powers are objects of thought, Pink says, not beings in spacetime. Their determining you to believe or desire would not be causal determination, and thus their powers to so determine you are not causal powers. Still, plainly it is not up to the mathematical truth or the desirable option whether (or how) they manifest these powers.[[9]](#footnote-9) If freedom is a non-causal power, apparently it is not an ordinary one of these, either. If it is puzzling how it could be up to us whether we exercise some causal power that we possess, it is no less puzzling how it could be up to us whether we exercise some non-causal power that we possess.

Does an appeal to agent causation help? Not by itself, particularly if, as Alvarez and Steward say, there is causation by objects, animate and inanimate, throughout nature. For it is not generally up to these things whether (or how) they exercise their powers to cause this or that. If agency—or free will—is a power of the thing possessing it to cause things, it is not an ordinary one of these, either. What would help would be some account of what it is about this power in virtue of which it is up to the beings who possess it when, where, whether, or how it is exercised.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Perhaps the idea of some who appeal to powers in explicating freedom is that there is nothing *about* a power to act, or freedom, *in virtue of which* it is up to beings who possess it whether certain things are the case; rather, it is *simply the nature of such a power* that this is so. This fact, it might be proposed, is one to be accepted with “natural piety” (as Samuel Alexander [1920, 47] said of the existence of emergent properties). But I am not sure that I have a good understanding of what I would be accepting in accepting such a fact.

6. BELIEF

Claims about the basic metaphysics of powers to act do not appear to illuminate our conception of our freedom. Might consideration of the psychological capacities of human agents help? Before turning to consider capacities to act, it might be fruitful to consider those that we have with respect to belief, for there are interesting similarities as well as differences.

It is sometimes said that our beliefs are up to us. Indeed, the claim is often made about “judgment-sensitive” attitudes in general—attitudes that, in T. M. Scanlon’s words, “an ideally rational person would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them and that would, in an ideally rational person, ‘extinguish’ when that person judged them not to be supported by reasons of the appropriate kind” (1998, 20). Such attitudes normally depend on one’s judgments about reasons, and, Scanlon maintains, it is “up to us to judge whether appropriate reasons for [such an] attitude are or are not present” (22). In a similar vein, Gary Watson holds that we exercise “cognitive agency” when we deliberate about whether something is so and form a belief about the matter on the basis of that deliberation. Making a “doxastic decision” in this way manifests one’s “adjudicative” capacities. Thus, “we can (and do) say that my beliefs are ‘up to me’: they are subject (potentially at least) to my decision-making powers, my normative competence” (2004, 147). The point, of course, is not that we can believe at will; it is that there is a kind of agency that does not involve will.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is notable that what Scanlon and Watson say are up to us are certain *attitudes*, or *forming* these; neither says that it is up to us *whether* we have or form these attitudes. But if some belief is up to me, then, it seems, with respect to some question, it is up to me *what* I believe.

Theoretical deliberation—deliberation about whether this or that is the case—and practical deliberation—deliberation about what to do, or whether do this or that—both commonly consider options—alternative ways the world might be, or alternative courses of conduct. But the former commonly leaves one with just one option, whereas the latter commonly leaves one able to opt for any of a plurality of options. Practical reasons are often inconclusive, and even when we find them conclusive, often we remain able to act contrary to our assessment of them.

The difference should not be overstated. Watson observes: “Just as I am powerless to believe that the Earth came into existence just a few thousand years ago, given what else I know, in the very same sense, it seems to me, I am powerless to form the intention to lop off my leg, given my other (non-destructive) doxastic and practical commitments” (2004, 145). It is an important difference nonetheless.

If theoretical deliberation leaves me with no option but to believe that *p*, is it up to me *whether* I believe that *p*? I would think not. It might nevertheless be said that my *belief*, and *what* I believe on this matter, are up to me in such a case. For my forming the belief is an exercise of a rational power, and this is a kind of activity.

If one on some occasion judges oneself to have sufficient evidence that *p* but opportunity to investigate further, one’s theoretical deliberation (so far) might leave one with options. We might then say that it is up to oneself *whether* one forms a certain belief then, where this implies nothing about the possibility of believing at will.

Further, if a human agent has normal cognitive capacities, and if the relevant evidence is accessible to her, it may be correct to say that with respect to some question whether *p*, it is up to her *whether she gets it right*.[[12]](#footnote-12) If she does not, she may nevertheless have been capable both of finding and appreciating the evidence and of drawing the right conclusion from it. This capacity will consist in part of powers to act—to raise and pursue questions, to seek information—but it is not only that. It is in part a power to assess the evidence found and rationally form belief on the basis of it.

If I understand him correctly, Pink denies that forming a belief on the basis of one’s appreciation of reasons is an exercise of one’s power. A capacity to believe rationally, he says, is a second-order capacity to exercise in a certain way one’s (first-order) capacity to believe. But the rational exercise of the latter capacity need not, he claims, involve the person’s exercise of power. On the contrary, my response to justification seems “to imply some subjection on my part to power from without” (2016, 130), in particular, to the normative power of the considerations that move me. Any appeal to a power on the believer’s part to determine what she believes is, Pink charges, “superfluous to understanding what, on any view, the capacity for reason clearly is—a capacity to respond to justifications” (131).

Powers generally require power-partners to produce their effects; effects are generally mutual manifestations of a plurality of powers.[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, the fact that reasons move me is compatible with—and arguably requires—my movement’s being an exercise of *my* power to recognize and respond to reasons. Appeal to such a power has a role to play in explaining why, in some case, the considerations yield rational belief.

Our adjudicative powers—rational powers that we can exercise in forming beliefs—are, like our powers to act, extraordinary: we’ve found such powers nowhere else in nature. But we might feel little temptation to think that they must differ in their basic metaphysical character from powers found elsewhere in nature. If it is nevertheless correct to think that in forming beliefs, commonly something is up to us—the beliefs that we form, what we believe, whether we get things right, perhaps sometimes whether we believe or not—perhaps we should not be so tempted to think that powers to act must be metaphysically *sui generis*.

It might be objected that a power to form a belief, too, since it is a power to respond to reasons, must be an extraordinary, non-causal power. But the argument will then have left behind the idea that it is the unique character of will, or free will, that requires a metaphysically *sui generis* power. For the appeal now will be to something more widespread than the will. Further, the putative non-causal nature of freedom would not account for the distinctive optionality that we commonly have with respect to action, for we do not commonly have the same optionality with belief.

7. A CONSTELLATION OF POWERS

As rational agents, we have a capacity for reasons-responsive conduct. This capacity in turn consists of, or is undergirded by, a number of capacities—powers, we may call them—some distinctly rational and others not. We form beliefs on the basis of evidence and by inference, usually taking ourselves to have good reason to believe what we believe. We notice and consider the things that are practical reasons, commonly appreciating them *as such*. We deliberate about what to do, anticipating outcomes of options under consideration, assessing and weighing reasons, judging options better, best, or good enough on various normative dimensions, and sometimes overall. We organize our own agency through time and coordinate our agency with that of other rational agents. We exercise powers of self-control, enabling us to resist temptation, some involving skill and some consisting of sheer will power. We make decisions and attempt the execution of intentions formed therein, acting when we do on the basis of our appreciation of reasons. For numerous kinds of action or activity, we possess the know-how required to carry out that conduct successfully.

These are distinctly rational powers. But we can exercise them well only because we have certain other capacities that are not distinctly rational—their exercise is not an exercise of reason—and the exercise of some of which is not itself action. Perceptual capacities in various modalities are required if we are to recognize reasons (for example, that there is an obstacle ahead). Deliberation requires capacities for attention and concentration. Fruitful deliberation requires powers of imagination in conceiving of possible ends and means to those ends. It requires working memory; one can’t deliberate well if one can’t keep track of considerations that one had in mind just a moment ago. A capacity to think of things relevant to one’s deliberative task is required if one is to deliberate well. Strength is needed to do many of the things that we are capable of doing. Deficiencies in these capacities may not themselves be deficiencies of rationality, but they can diminish the range and reasons-responsiveness of one’s agency.

The freedom possessed by an ordinary human agent is extraordinary. One take on it—Pink’s view seems to be an example—sees it as exceptional in some basic metaphysical respect. An alternative sees it as exceptional due to its being constituted by, and undergirded by, an exceptional constellation of powers. Certainly, we find such a constellation nowhere else in nature.

Imagine an ordinary human agent in circumstances “friendly” to her *A*-ing, and friendly, as well, to her *B*-ing (something incompatible with her *A*-ing). That is, with respect to each option, she has opportunity, in an ordinary sense: her location is right, no instruments needed for her to do either thing are lacking, and there are no obstacles to her doing either thing that she lacks the power to surmount. Suppose that she has all of the capacities needed to knowingly *A* then—the capacity to conceive of *A*-ing as an option, the know-how and strength required—and none would be removed or blocked from exercise should she proceed toward exercising them in *A*-ing; and likewise for *B*-ing. (As it might be put, her capacities are “unthreatened.”) Suppose that she has reasons to *A* and reasons to *B*, and she has normal capacities to recognize, assess, and act on her assessment of these reasons, capacities that, again, would not be removed or blocked should she proceed toward exercising them. *A*-ing and *B*-ing then appear to be options for her.

Whether she *A*-s or *B*-s then will be a matter of whether and how she exercises various unthreatened powers that she possesses, in circumstances friendly to their exercise. We might then say that it will be determined by her. Do we have here sufficient conditions for its being up to this agent whether she *A*-s or *B*-s on this occasion?

We might still wonder whether it is up to her *whether and how she exercises her capacities*. If she does not do so, this will not be due to her lacking opportunity or the requisite capacities, or to the latter being impeded. Still, if determinism is true, her exercising them or not, in this way or in that, will be determined by something in the distant past. And if her exercising them or not, in this way or in that, is undetermined, then it might seem to be at least partly a matter of chance. These thoughts are, of course, familiar challenges to the idea that we have free will.

It is notable that analogous thoughts do not seem to pose as forceful a challenge to the idea that, often in forming beliefs, something is up to us—the beliefs, or what we believe, or whether we get things right, perhaps sometimes whether we believe or not. Although, as I’ve said, there is commonly a difference of optionality between the case of belief and that of action, it is not obvious that the difference comes down to a difference with respect to either determinism or chance. Just why the challenge should be more forceful in the case of action is part of the puzzle of what it comes to for it to be up to oneself whether one *A*-s.

8. DEVELOPMENT AND INDETERMINACY

As philosophers writing about free will commonly do, I’ve focused on individual occasions of action. But, of course, a human agent does not act on just one occasion. We have, and we know that we have, pasts and futures. We act in light of our understanding of the former and in anticipation of the latter. Further, the influences on us, on many occasions when we act, include states of ourselves that have resulted, in part, from our own past conduct. When one acts, one acts as an agent partly of one’s own making.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These ordinary facts might contribute to an understanding of what it is for it to be up to oneself, on some occasion, whether something is the case. Not only is it often the case that whether a human agent *A*-s or *B*-s is a matter of whether and how she exercises various unthreatened capacities that she possesses; it is also often the case that whether such an agent possesses certain capacities is in part a result of whether and how she has, on numerous occasions in the past, exercised various capacities that she then possessed.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Of course, these thoughts don’t put to rest the worry raised in the preceding section. For the worry can be raised about the earlier conduct now under consideration. We might think that if earlier conduct is to contribute, through influence on the agent’s now having certain capacities, to its now being up to her whether something is the case, then on those earlier occasions it must have been up to the agent whether something would be the case. And it might seem doubtful that her possession then of some rich constellation of unthreatened capacities, together with opportunity, can suffice for this.

Perhaps we go wrong to think that only earlier conduct that was itself free can contribute in the suggested way to the agent’s current freedom. An alternative picture is one on which freedom, like great size, can arise gradually from small changes to things that don’t determinately have this property.

Sentences such as ‘It’s up to you whether you *A*’ appear to be vague, with the vagueness deriving in part from ‘It’s up to you whether’. This fact shows up independently of developmental issues. Consider again a weightlifter who attempts, on a certain occasion, to deadlift 200 kg. If her attempts at this weight routinely succeed, it might be up to her whether she lifts it on this occasion. If they’ve always before failed, we might deny that it is up to her whether she succeeds this time. Somewhere in between, it appears indeterminate.

Quite plausibly a similar indeterminacy shows up in normal human development. If it is ever up to us whether something is the case, plausibly very early in our lives this is determinately not so, in our adult conduct often it determinately is so, and somewhere in between there is a stretch during which the matter is vague.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Such a picture fits well with the idea that its being up to you whether you *A* is a matter of your having opportunities to act as well as a constellation of unthreatened capacities, for it might well sometimes be a vague matter whether one’s capacities are collectively up to snuff. Of course, we have still not seen that any such thing can be sufficient; our target phenomenon remains a puzzling one.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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1. If on some occasion it is up to me whether I *A*, it might also be up to me whether a certain thing occurs that would result from my *A*-ing. However, I limit attention here to formulations, like (1) and (2), concerning one’s agency itself. Of course, whether one *A*-s (e.g., lifts a book) can itself be a matter of whether one brings about certain consequences. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Such an argument might be advanced by appeal to cases like several presented by Frankfurt (1969). Regarding one of his examples, Frankfurt maintains that although the agent is responsible for what he does, “what action he performs is not up to him” (836). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Steward maintains that it is a “category mistake” to claim that *some particular action* is up to its agent (2012, 37). Particular things, she says, “are not the *sorts* of things that can be ‘up to’ anyone” (37). Consider an act of buttering toast. Steward argues:

   Just as a particular table could only be said to be “up to me” if I were using that expression as shorthand for some other claim, e.g. to the effect that its *existence* was up to me (because I was the carpenter who made it) or its *location* (in my house) was up to me (because I was the person who bought it), so one could only mean by saying that a particular buttering was up to me that *whether or not* to butter was up to me (as well perhaps as where, when, and how to butter). The buttering qua particular event (if particular event is indeed what a buttering is) cannot have been up to me. (37)

   Unlike tables, my actions are my doings of this or that; and it is not obviously mistaken to think that my doings can be up to me. Still, if we accept that a single action can be variously described, a focus on *questions* that might be up to an agent will aid clarity. For on some occasion it might be up to an agent whether she *A*-s but not up to her whether she *B*-s, even though an action that she performs then is correctly described both as an *A*-ing and as a *B*-ing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Alvarez (2013), Lowe (2008, 2013), Pink (2011, 2016, 2019), and Steward (2012). Two-way powers are contrasted with one-way powers, which “are characterized by the fact that when the conditions for their manifestation obtain, the power will be necessarily manifested” (Alvarez 2013, 109). For argument that many ordinary dispositions may not, in fact, be such one-way powers, see Hájek (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I agree that not deciding—and, in general, not *A*-ing—need not be an action of any kind; see Clarke (2014, chs. 1 & 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pink (2011, 363) offers a similar characterization of a “two- or multi-way” power. However, he also recognizes (2016, 121) the possibility of freedom with respect to *whether* one exercises a certain power without freedom with respect to *how* the power is exercised, if it is. In that case, he says, the power would not be multi-way, but one would still possess “freedom in relation to the power”; see below, section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Steward remarks: “The truth about the relation between agency and alternative possibility is…that in order for a given *φ*-ing to count as one’s action, the *φ*-ing in question has to have *some* description as a V-ing…such that the agent was able not to V” (2012, 184). (On her view, in *every* exercise of agency it is up to the agent whether something is the case.) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Neither Alvarez nor Steward denies that there is causation by events and states. (Steward [2012, 210-16] affirms it.) Still, their view is that causation by an agent is not, and is not reducible to, causation by either of these kinds of thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pink also mentions the moral power of promisors to impose obligations on themselves and that of promisees to release promisors from such obligations. A promisee’s declaration of “I release you,” he observes, can determine the removal of an obligation, and the determination is not causal. Be that as it may, it is not up to the declaration whether this power is manifested. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Two further features of Steward’s (2012) view of agency should be noted. She holds that exercises of agency must be undetermined, and that they involve “top-down” or downward causation. But she accepts that the behavior of things that aren’t agents can involve one or another (or both) of these features. Hence these features don’t suffice to distinguish a power to act.

    Might the key to understanding be found in the *combination* of substance causation, indeterminism, and downward causation (as Steward [2014, 556] suggests)? I don’t find that it has been explained how this might be so. Suppose that when I act I cause certain motions of electrons, and my doing so is undetermined. It might still be asked in virtue of what it is up to me whether I cause these motions.

    Thorough consideration of Steward’s view would require, as well, close attention to her notion of “settling” some matter. “In order that some question or matter be up to me,” she says, I have to be able “to *settle* that matter” (2012, 26). It is not clear that all of the matters that I settle when I act are up to me. Might I be incapable of conceiving of some of these, or incapable of producing some of them at will? Limitations of space preclude examination here of exactly how these two important notions are related. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Both Scanlon and Watson argue for responsibility for belief, though Watson adds that “there are dimensions of moral accountability for intention that have no counterpart in the epistemic case” (2004, 151). Whether our agency with respect to belief grounds a kind of moral responsibility is a question I leave open here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pettit and Smith (1996) offer an account of freedom with respect to belief on which “to hold a belief…freely is to hold it in the presence of an ability, should the belief…be wrong, to get it right” (445). Bracketing their view of exactly what such an ability comes to, it seems apparent that we commonly have it. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I take this way of putting things from Martin (2008, ch. 5). Consider an example: the sweetening of tea when one adds sugar is a mutual manifestation of a power of the tea to dissolve sugar and a power of the sugar to dissolve in tea. The latter is not mere passivity, but as much a power as the former. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kane (1996, 71-78) and Mele (2006, 129-33) make this observation in developing indeterministic theories of free will. My suggestion here employs it without regard to compatibilism or incompatibilism. McGeer (2018) highlights the role of repeated exercise in the ongoing development of “intelligent capacities.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Al Mele for raising this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rosen suggests that “someone might hold that responsibility is a vague matter, and that there can be derivative responsibility without original responsibility for the same reason that there can be chickens even if there was no original chicken” (2004, 299). Of course, responsibility might be a vague matter even if free will is not; but we have similar reasons favoring vagueness in the two cases.

    As I noted above, Steward (2012) holds that in every instance of agency—including, for example, that of spiders—there is some matter that is up to the agent. I am not sure that I agree. But even if she is correct on this point, if (as she [107-14] accepts) it can be indeterminate whether some organism is an agent, it can be vague whether anything is ever up to a given organism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For comments on drafts of this paper, I’m grateful to Maria Alvarez, Helen Beebee, Andrew Christman, Al Mele, Thomas Pink, and Ann Whittle. Thanks, as well, to students in Michael McKenna and Carolina Sartorio’s seminar at the University of Arizona, Fall 2019, and an audience at the Princeton Workshop in Normative Philosophy, November 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)